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TAGS: PREL MARR MOPS PBTS GG RS

SUBJECT: RUSSIAN MFA CONFIRMS POSITIVE CHANGE IN ABKHAZIA POSITION

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason: 1.4 (b, d)

Summary

¶1. (C) MFA Fourth CIS Director Andrey Kelin briefed PolMinCouns on the Russian position toward Georgia's Kodori Gorge January 31, making explicit the positive change hinted to DAS Bryza in Berlin January 22. Russia will now accept the presence of up to 200 Georgian internal troops in Kodori (the previous position demanded complete withdrawal and the removal of the Georgian-backed "Abkhaz Government in Exile").

Kelin implied a deal: Russia will agree to a reduced Georgian presence in exchange for a UN visit by Abkhaz "Foreign Minister" Shamba. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Kelin told PolMinCouns that Russia's concern about the Georgian armed presence in Kodori is the capacity to attack Abkhazia. Now, he said, Georgia has 500-530 internal troops there -- nearly a battalion. This provides real offensive capability. If the Georgian forces were reduced to 200 (with complete removal of heavy weaponry), the level would be "normal." Kelin signaled that Russia is open to discussion on the number, its only concern being the offensive capability; he reiterated that Russia understands the legitimate need for a Georgian police presence in Kodori. He stated that UNOMIG has not verified the withdrawal of heavy weaponry, and that Georgia maintains fortifications, helicopters, mortars and armored personnel carriers.

¶3. (C) Kelin asked for U.S. cooperation in granting a visa to Abkhaz "Foreign Minister" Sergey Shamba for a visit to address the UN (format to be decided by the UN, but not necessarily Arria). We noted that the issue is under review, but flagged Washington's concerns over previous Abkhaz demands that all Georgian forces leave Kodori before the Abkhaz would re-engage in the negotiating process. Kelin said he will travel to Abkhazia February 1 and will discuss the issue with Shamba.

Comment

¶4. (C) Kelin never said the Russian position has changed, but clearly he was proposing a deal to change it: Russia would agree to a Georgian presence, at a level reduced ostensibly for security concerns, but also to save face. In addition, Kelin pointedly left out previous Russian demands for the removal from Kodori of the Georgian-backed "Abkhaz Government in Exile." In return, the U.S. would agree to let Shamba address the UN.

¶5. (C) That proposal is clearly a first bargaining position, but there may well be a deal to be hammered out with the Russians, other FSG members, and the parties. In addition to agreement on an acceptable Georgian force level (presumably somewhere between 200 and 500) and weaponry consistent with

the 1994 Moscow Agreement, the deal could include both explicit Abkhaz commitment to re-engage in the negotiating process and Russian agreement on acceptable elements of the next UNSC resolution to renew UNOMIG's mandate, dropping negative mention of Georgian actions and deployments in Kodori. In our view, that gain would be well worth a visa for Shamba.

BURNS